

# Finding Their Path

**Bishop Klaus Hemmerle**

*The late Klaus Hemmerle, bishop of Aachen, Germany, attentively and thoughtfully observed cultural change and human development in the light of the Gospel message. To this end, he assembled an important catechetical text containing a number of wide-ranging reflections, entitled 'Youth Today and the Problem of Faith'.<sup>1</sup> We re-propose a few of its surprisingly relevant and timely passages here.*

As persons belonging to society, youth can be thought of as passing through a phase in which they challenge the adult world through critical questioning and alternative ideas, goals and initiatives. And they offer hope that these ideas can be realized so as to foster change [...]

This means Christian faith is challenged too. But, if we deprive men and women of this opportunity as young people, we also risk undermining what is at the root of human faith. At the same time, theological, moral, and institutional expressions of Christian faith are often seen as stumbling blocks to youthful creativity and dynamism. Thus, young people's future faith in Christ and the Church must be worked out within this dynamic. [...]

Our diagnosis of this situation can be summed up in three points:

Religion and faith need to be envisioned as an individual relationship with a friend, one who is also a model to be imitated. It is an experiential relationship at a personal level that has relevance and meaning in the present. It is a relationship that is a direct and self-authenticating communion at the same time.

Concepts of religion and faith, however, imply and require a basic choice for the whole of a person's life. In the face of one's own personal, lived experiences and those of the world around them, this can seem surreal. Thus, it is cast aside.

The institutional aspects of religion and faith are rejected. The institution is not seen as guaranteeing one's freedom but rather as an obstacle to both a real future and meaningful experiences in the present [...]

While it is true that there is also the reality of new religiosity in young people, this is not in conflict with our conclusions above. This new religiosity among youth has a clearly anti-institutional character. It rarely leads to lasting commitments or definitive choices.

But there is a positive aspect to this seemingly negative picture: It is found in the search for one's own path.

Today's youth continue to pose questions that seem to arise in the face of disappointments but are in reality a sign of hope-filled searching: How do I move forward with my life? How can I discover my own path? If courage and commitment concerning the future begin to

fade, it is precisely because this path seems non-existent. [...] It is up to us to assume this role by accompanying young people and going before them. It means showing youth that the Christian message and the Christian community signify a journey of faith opening before them! [...]

A fundamental and necessary starting point for a Christian and ecclesial experience is that of a personal experience of communion, because following Jesus is a communal reality. The Church is never only an organization or institution but rather it is composed of living cells [...]

Despite their many reservations and radical questioning of structure, dogma and all that is taboo, youth still react positively to an encounter with all that is true, convincing and authentic. Their diffidence regarding the Church and Christianity can be overcome if it is met by a credible faith, a faith lived out and incarnated in the face of human challenges and the needs of society. Thus, if faith in Jesus Christ and therefore in the Church is to take hold in new ways among today's youth, Christianity must prove itself by giving a powerful witness, perhaps in ways never seen before. [...]

The mediating character of the institution becomes clear and credible through a living witness to the Church's institutional aspect as the reality in which a genuine encounter with the living God is made possible. Not just through a communion among persons, but with Christ himself. We are not talking about instrumentalizing the Gospel for dogma or Christ for the Church or speaking of grace in terms of moral laws. Rather, it is about discovering the Gospel and the Lord through its moral teachings and dogma. It is about creating a space within the Church to encounter the living Christ and reawaken a life based completely on grace. [...]

In offering such a model as a 'way forward', the intention is not to set aside any part of the Church or its message of faith. Rather, it is arriving from the perspective of God reaching out to us, from the way of his love. This does not involve deducing the whole of the Gospel from a single principle. Rather, it means following God in his journey, one that is mysteriously revealed through the many expressions and meanings of his unique being, his love, and his presence. [...]

Obviously, such a catechesis is fully dependent upon the authentic witness of those who proclaim its message and upon the depth of the existing community from which the teaching flows. Only those able to communicate their own journey experience and that of others can successfully bring forward such a catechesis. Whoever receives this catechesis, however, also grows in their own consciousness that he or she must now become an active and spontaneous protagonist in this process of communication as well.

---

<sup>1</sup> *I giovani oggi e il problema della fede (Youth Today and the Problem of Faith)*, in S. Cola (ed.), *Per una catechesi vitale (Towards a More Vibrant Catechism)*, Città Nuova, Rome 1979, pp. 59-76.